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SATURDAY NIGHT THOUGHTS IN LENT

OLIVIA EGLESTON PHELPS STOKES

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BY

OLIVIA EGLESTON PHELPS STOKES

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Dear Lord and Father of mankind,
Forgive our foolish ways!
Re-clothe us in our rightful mind,
In purer lives Thy service find,
In deeper reverence, praise.

In simple trust like theirs who heard,
Beside the Syrian sea,
The gracious calling of the Lord,
Let us, like them, without a word,
Rise up and follow Thee.

JOHN G. WHITTIER.

An ancient people kept the night before their Sabbath as a time of preparation for the following day. May it not be helpful for us to follow their example during the coming season of Lent, and take time on Saturday nights to prepare for the Lord's day?

Let us consider for a few moments in the quiet of this evening the relation of a loving father to an obedient affectionate child, and this will help us to understand the relation of our Heavenly Father to us. The child has confidence in his father, tells him all that happens, makes him his hero, is proud of him, tells other boys about him, and wants them to know him. His ambition is to be like his father. The father advises, directs, and with love reproves his son. There is sympathy and understanding between them beautiful to see, which brings contentment and happiness to both.

This outlines the relation that should exist between our Heavenly Father and us His children. It should be a relation of mutual trust and confidence. We should go to our Heavenly Father with all the events of our life, and ask His advice and guidance. We should speak to Him often and enjoy His companionship. There should be a bond of sympathy between us and our Heavenly Father that will grow deeper and stronger as life goes on. We should feel Him near to us at all times, knowing that we have His loving sympathy in trouble and sorrow, and that He will never leave us nor forsake us, even to the end of the world, and will lead us to the Other World, always helping us and loving us.

Let us to-night and to-morrow read about our Heavenly Father, think about Him, talk to Him, realizing that He is a kind, loving, all powerful Father, until our hearts are full of love to Him, and we desire to do what He wishes us to do, to be like Him, to work with Him, to tell others about Him, remembering that when the disciples asked Christ how they should address God, He said, when ye pray, say Father.

Last Saturday night we considered God as our Heavenly Father, realizing that He was a loving Father, and we resolved that we would do what He wishes us to do. We know that it will be difficult to keep some of His commandments, and to-night and to-morrow let us consider the great help we have in doing His will.

The Bible gives us to understand that man is made in God's image, and the difference between God and man appears to be largely that God is perfect and has vast power. We see in California the great trees; no human hand planted them, no human hand nourished them, but God the great gardener planted them and brought them to perfection. We look up to the heavens to-night and see the multitude of stars and planets each revolving on its own orbit, each keeping on its own course, not touching nor interfering with each other. The sun goes down at night out of sight but

we are sure it will rise again in the morning. These things give us some idea of God's power.

There are many men and women who have been desperately bound down by wrong habits but by God's power overcame them and became fine and noble. We recall what the Apostle Paul said, "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me." John Gough, the great temperance lecturer, was "staggering along the streets of Worcester, hopeless, homeless, on the very verge of self-destruction. A kind hand is laid on his shoulder, a kind voice calls him by name and asks, 'Why not sign the pledge, Mr. Gough?'" He did so and became one of the greatest lecturers on temperance, and the means of leading thousands to change their lives.

We have seen in the great war frail women undertake work which appeared far beyond their strength, and that they did not seem physically able to do. Still they went forward and did more than their friends believed they could do, conducting canteens for soldiers, being up at all hours of the night when trains came through where they were working, carrying along the sides of the trains heavy trays of hot

coffee for the soldiers within who could not disembark, and doing it happily and with a smile. When canteens were bombarded they spent the night in cellars, sometimes standing the whole night, thankful if they could find places to lean against the wall, or greatly relieved if they could carry in chairs on which to rest. And in hospitals where the wounded were crowded in they did the bravest work.

We remember how the soldiers met the life of the camp, and dying bravely appeared before their Maker "Gentlemen all," that is, pure, true and brave.

The power to do all this came from their Maker. This power He stands ready to impart to all His children at any hour of the day or night, to enable them to resist temptation, to keep strong, and to help them to make their characters like God's character.

"Forgive us for so often looking on the limitations of our lives instead of realizing our limitless power in Thy power; and forgive us for all our incomprehensible slowness in making use of the power."

What are the fruits of the spirit? The Apostle Paul has told us what some of these are when he wrote: "The fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, fidelity, meekness, self-control."

Let us consider to-night and to-morrow whether we have these fruits of the spirit, how we can get them and help others to have them. To have them is according to our Heavenly Father's wishes, for Christ His son has said, "Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit; and so shall ye be my disciples." If we are keeping His commandments and are living in communion with our Heavenly Father these fruits will grow. We must not be discouraged if we do not have what we wish immediately, but remember that it is "First the blade, then the ear, then the full corn in the ear."

A candle may remain for years on the mantel and it is only when it is lit that light shines from it into the room and it is of

service. Gas needs a match applied before it gives out a flame to light and serve. Electricity must have a spark before it can illuminate and give out its wonderful power. There are men and women who live without giving out light and service; they need to take the power God can give them and by its help shine and do service for God.

There are many all around us who need our help. Our community needs our help, organized ways of doing good need our help, our country needs our help, and the world needs our help. Two things are especially needed at present. One is to provide suitable meeting places for men to take the place of the closed saloon, and the other is to urge and encourage the large constituency of women who have lately become voters to use their votes for the good of their country, doing their utmost to put only the best men into office, and seeing that the government is conducted with justice and honesty.

Let us earnestly consider where best we can use the power God has given us to help make this world God's world. Let us go through life with our hands extended ready to help others who may stumble in

the way, showing others how they may resist temptation, how they may be patient under trials, substituting courage for self-pity, how they may get rid of jealousy, envy, pride, irritability and all evils, and have Christ as their companion.

This prayer may be helpful for us to use to-night and to-morrow:

"Search me, O God, and know my heart:
Try me, and know my thoughts:
And see if there be any way of wickedness in me,
And lead me in the way everlasting."

Are we not apt to think that prayer is asking God for things we want? But is this the highest meaning of prayer? Is not prayer more truly communion with God, asking God to tell us what He wants us to do, to make the path of duty clear to us? Being willing to do what God wishes us to do, should we not earnestly and happily ask that we may know what His will is, and not only to know what He wishes us to do but to ask Him to be with us in doing it, and to give us help to do it? In this communion with our Heavenly Father we become acquainted with Him.

Prayer is as certain to be heard as eating food is certain to sustain life. Have you not been assailed by a temptation, and upon lifting your heart in prayer, felt the force of the temptation lessened, so that you could put it from you? Or when hard, unjust words have been spoken, and a cry has been sent to God, have not, instead of hatred and bitterness, quiet and peace entered your soul?

Have sorrow and remorse come for wrong acts that have injured your life or, more deeply sad, injured the life of another, yet even in the anguish, did not help come with the knowledge that Another mightier and more powerful was not failing you, but was walking by your side comforting you? For in loss and cruel loneliness, His sustaining love is yours; peace comes through speaking with Him.

We can speak to Him at any time of day and night and have His help. Tennyson wrote:

"Speak to Him, thou, for He hears, and
Spirit with Spirit can meet —
Closer is He than breathing, and nearer
than hands and feet."

Many, very many can testify to prayer answered. Through prayer they have come to know what God wants them to do and have obtained strength to carry on the work He has given them to do, doing it not sadly but joyously.

In doing God's will, keeping His commandments, communing or talking with Him, He becomes "The Great Companion" and no life can be lonely or sad with

His companionship. A great preacher has written of this companionship: "I cannot tell you how personal this grows to me. He is here. He knows me, I know Him. It is no figure of speech. It is the reallest thing in the world, and every day makes it realler. And one wonders with delight what it will grow to as the years go on." May we learn to know by practice what this communion means, and the blessedness and inspiration of this companionship.

The Century Dictionary defines a miracle as "An effect in nature not attributable to any of the recognized operations of nature nor to the act of man, but indicative of superhuman power, and serving as a sign or witness thereof." Considering this definition together with the fact that men are discovering "operations of nature" not recognized nor known before, we realize that miracles are going on all the time, only we have not recognized them.

We did not know we could telegraph until Morse discovered the "operations of nature" that accomplished this. We did not know that we could speak through a tube and our voices be heard across a continent until Bell discovered the "operations of nature" that enable us to do this. A sinking liner could not call for help in the midst of the ocean by wireless telegraphy, and steamers rush to its assistance saving hundreds of its passengers from death, until Marconi discovered the "operations of nature" that made this possible. Watts watched a simple "opera-

tion of nature" and learned from it to make the steam engine which revolutionized transportation on land and sea, and solved many of its problems.

When I was young we had a large aquarium which contained aquatic plants, gold fish and tadpoles. We were told that these tadpoles would turn into frogs, but having outlived the charming legend of Santa Claus, I kept quiet determining to see for myself if that statement was correct. I watched in the light and sunshine of a large window these square-set tadpoles going up and down the aquarium, propelled by their flat, wriggling tails, and found it difficult to believe that these creatures could become slender, long-legged frogs; but one spring morning there on the top of a growing, aquatic plant sat a shiny, long-legged frog, blinking his eyes. I was startled and stood quite subdued, thinking, and I know in substance that I thought, "This has been done by some one." And then I thought, "It is God who did it," and I was awed by the thought of what the wonderful Heavenly Father could do.

Again I remember that when years later my sister and I were traveling in Europe,

the night before we left Paris for the United States a Frenchman called and on leaving gave my sister some silkworm eggs, saying they would make the finest of silkworms. My sister put the pretty, tiny, yellow and white eggs into a small wooden box, and on returning to New York put the box into a closet. During the long, cold winter the eggs were forgotten, but one day in spring she remembered them, and opening the box found several mites of worms, with some dead ones, and some eggs not hatched. Lettuce and all available green vegetables were given these mites but they would not touch them. I remembered my mother telling us that when she was young the raising of silkworms was encouraged in this country, ladies taking up the occupation on patriotic principles, and that when mulberry leaves were not available, the leaves of the osage orange could be substituted. As we had a hedge of these bushes in our city garden that were just coming into leaf, some were immediately picked and the tiny atoms that were lying quiet and apparently dying began ravenously to eat them. Later mulberry leaves procured from a nursery on Long Island were fed to them.

These little worms quickly grew into large caterpillars. They were placed with twigs of the mulberry tree in a large box, which was put into the conservatory opening from the library, and the first thing in the morning and the last at night were inspected and commented on. In time these very large caterpillars ceased to eat, and one was noticed to be weaving fine silk thread around and between the fork of a mulberry twig. Soon all the caterpillars were spinning beautiful yellow or white cocoons, living tombs they seemed, for we could see the caterpillar moving about inside. Then all was still, death seemed to reign. We would look into this large box of tombs as one would go into a room where some one lay dead, feeling that all life must be over. One morning a shout came from the conservatory that a cocoon was opening. A beautiful white moth, struggling hard to emerge through an opening it had made in the cocoon, worked his way out and in a few days one by one the cocoons were opened, and the big box was filled with moths. I stood at its side as I had stood as a little girl by our aquarium and said, "It is God who has done this."

And so it was when reading the miracles

in the Bible, it was not difficult to believe them for I said, "I too have seen miracles; they are going on all the time about us, only we do not recognize them." Do not these wonders and the miracles in the Bible serve "as a sign of a superhuman power" constantly working for us? May it not be well for us to carefully observe the works of nature and to help children to observe them and to realize that these are God's work? We are comforted when we realize that God is not far off, but that He is here working constantly for His children. May it not be that in these manifestations God is showing us His power, and should we not more fully realize that He is ready at all times to communicate this power to His children to help them to do right?

There are two kinds of courage, one is physical and the other is moral. Both are good and are to be desired, and we should have both.

We need courage on awaking each morning to meet the duties of the home life, the temptations, the cares and the sorrows of the day. Sometimes we take these up with a heavy, sad heart; nerves may not be strong, and a dread hangs over us that we will not be able to do what is required of us. May not the words of the English writer, Arthur Benson, help us? "In old days, if I had a disagreeable engagement ahead of me, something to which I looked forward with anxiety or dislike, I used to find that it poisoned my cup. Now it is beginning to be the other way; and I find myself with a heightened sense of pleasure in the quiet and peaceful days that have to intervene before the fateful morning dawns. I used to awake in the morning on the days that were still my own before the day which I dreaded, and begin, in that agitated mood which used to

accompany the return of consciousness after sleep, when the mind is alert but unbalanced, to anticipate the thing I feared, and feel that I could not face it. Now I tend to awake and say to myself, ' Well, at any rate I have still to-day in my own hands '; and then the very day itself has an increased value from the feeling that the uncomfortable experience lies ahead."

It is also well to recall these lines:

" Build a little fence of trust around to-day,
Fill the space with loving deeds, and therein stay,
Look not through the sheltering bars upon to-morrow,
God will help thee bear what comes, of joy or sorrow."

These most helpful thoughts give us courage to undertake each duty of the day calmly and quietly, for " As thy days so shall thy strength be," and night shuts down upon us with the knowledge that with God's help we have done what was required of us well. An Eastern monarch demanded a motto which should enable him to bear prosperity with moderation, and adversity with fortitude and was given, " This, too, will soon pass over."

We need courage when temptations come to resist them; to resist the temptation to exaggerate in story and in statement before it becomes a habit, and we become untrustworthy. There comes the temptation not to tell the whole truth, for if we do we will be blamed. Or we colour our statements and the truth is not seen. These half truths are mean, cowardly things, they hurt our souls. Lowell has written of truth:

"Those love her best who to themselves are true,
And what they dare to dream of, dare to do."

Henry Dwight Sedgwick writes of young Colonel Charles Russell Lowell who was killed in the Civil War and who had both physical and moral courage: "While Lowell lay stretched on a table, just before his death, paralyzed from the shoulders down, one of his officers was lying near him, dying, and oppressed by the agony of death. Lowell said to him, 'I have always been able to count on you, you were always brave. Now you must meet this as you have the other trials — be steady — I count on you.' In the presence of death he

shared with his comrade his own courage."

Many an invalid is a blessing to her family; her patient, courageous life has inspired the lives of others, and the love poured out has brought rich returns to the giver.

Courage is needed to fight the enemies in our own country, who by stealing from their country's treasury, and in other ways, are injuring her. We need courage to correct the faults in our churches, first by living nobly ourselves, shining for God in our own places. We need courage to face our faults and our sins, to determine us to get rid of them and to profit by the lessons to be learned from them, then in God's strength to go forward to meet the difficulties of life, not worrying over the past. Courage is needed to live with people who are not sympathetic with us, who are uncongenial. Courage is needed to bear bravely untruthful accusations against us, some so wide-spread and difficult to correct that they must be borne a lifetime. If another is slandered we must not remain quiet and let it pass, but correct it and do for others what we would want them to do for us. If we have made mistakes, if we have sinned, and friends do not trust us, then

infinite courage is needed to reconstruct our lives. Courage is needed when we decide on a course of action that we believe to be right to steadily hold to it.

We recall the poem telling of courage in the trenches:

"There is a Light wher'er I go,
There is a Splendor where I wait.
Though all around be desolate,
Warm on my eyes I feel the glow.

The fight is long, the triumph slow,
Yet shall my soul stand strong and straight;
There is a Light wher'er I go,
There is a Splendor where I wait."

To-morrow we will commemorate an event in Christ's life that proves His great love for us. He said while on this earth, "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends," and that is what Christ did for us. In coming to this world Christ helped us in many ways. He manifested or proved to us what God really is. The world appears to have thought of God as severe and ready to punish at the slightest provocation, but Christ who was like His Father showed us by His life and death that God was a loving, kind Father ready to forgive all who repented of their sins. In living among us Christ showed us by His life how we must live and how to make our characters like His character, and then He showed His great unselfish love for us by suffering death on the cross.

God forgives to the uttermost. An ancient prophet has said, "Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow." Our sins weigh upon us like heavy

chains around our necks. It is wrong and deeply sad that we have sinned, but our Heavenly Father will help us to bear the burden. Let us ask Him to do this.

Do not be afraid to go to Him. "He pities those who fear Him." He is longing and waiting for us to come to Him. No earthly father or mother can rejoice over a child who has strayed far from his home and returned as God rejoices. Earthly parents do not say, "Some one must be found to bear the punishment of your sins before I can forgive you." When the prodigal son, who had wasted all his substance in riotous living returned repentant to his father's home, his father seeing him coming afar off ran to meet him and fell on his neck and kissed him saying, "This my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost and is found."

Our Heavenly Father is watching for our return from wrong doing. If we return to Him repentant He will take us in His embrace and welcome us home and "joy shall be in heaven" over our return. Let us go to Him repenting and give Him this joy, and let us get the peace in our hearts which will come from this. Should not His love determine us with the deepest

determination to sin no more, to keep our hand in His hand, looking up to Him for help?

"Repentance is to leave the sins we loved before,
And show that we in earnest are by doing them no more."

Christ by His death teaches us the law of sacrifice, the entering into the lives of others with love as He did, the bearing of others' burdens. In His anguish on the cross He did not think of Himself. He prayed for those who brought about His death, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do." For His mother He gave loving thought, commending her to the care of His beloved disciple and friend, who was to be a son in His place.

No words of ours can repay His love, but there is a way for we remember that He said, "If a man love me, he will keep my word: and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him." And He has made this way easy in promising, "I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world." It encourages us in our trials to remember

that although under the shadow of approaching death on the cross he could say, " My peace I give unto you." We too may have this peace if we live in His companionship and like Him are lovingly, helpfully, sacrificing ourselves for others. May we determine to-night that we will have this peace, and that we will be better and nobler this coming year than ever before.

Two nights ago we considered Christ's death and how in it He showed His great love for us, and to-night as we consider His resurrection we realize another token of His love for us in His rising from the dead, and we have the happiness of realizing that our resurrection is sure.

On the Friday when our Lord's body had been taken down from the cross, Joseph of Arimathea laid it in his own tomb which he had hewn out of the rock in a garden. As the two Marys came to this sepulchre they found the stone that closed the sepulchre rolled away and saw two angels sitting, one at the head and another at the feet where the body of Christ had lain. Wondering who had taken away their Lord they turned away, and Mary, meeting someone whom she supposed to be the gardener, asked him if he had taken Him away where he had laid Him. Christ's reply, "Mary," must have been full of love, and probably with some sorrow in the tones, sorrow

because she had not believed His words that He would rise again. Mary's heart was full of joy as she hastened to tell His disciples that their Leader and beloved Friend had risen.

After this He appeared several times to different disciples. One of these occasions was in Galilee at the Sea of Tiberias. It was in the quiet of the morning and as He stood on the shore of the lake, the tired disciples were coming in after a night of unsuccessful fishing. He called to them, "Children, have ye any meat?" and as they came toward the shore they saw the blue smoke of a fire ascending and Jesus standing by. How their hearts must have been moved! There was their Leader whom they had lived with and followed from city to city, whom they had professed to love, but whom in His hour of agony and death they had forsaken and fled from, leaving Him without their support and comfort. We also remember that Peter was with them, who had said, "Although all shall be offended, yet will not I," and then had denied Christ three times and with oaths declared he never knew Him.

Jesus gave them no formal welcome but with love He had prepared what tired, dis-

couraged, hungry men needed, and had ready a fire to warm them with "fish laid thereon, and bread," and with welcome in His voice He said, "Come and dine." There was no word of reproach in the welcome. After they had eaten He said more than once to Peter, "Lovest thou me?" and vacillating Peter became henceforth as firm as his name indicates, a rock. Could we have treated friends who forsook and left us to die as Jesus met those who had forsaken Him and fled, leaving Him to the cruel death on the cross?

Inspired by Christ's love and example the disciples went everywhere telling of the resurrection. Men who had only partially believed in it rejoiced, and many joined His disciples in becoming Christ's followers. Let us not forget His command, "Follow thou me," and to pray to Him and call Him "Father."

We make too much of creeds and dogmatic statements of beliefs. Facts about some of them are not clear, and wise and good men differ in interpreting them. Too much dwelling on them separates Christ's followers. What is essential for true Christian living is stated constantly in the Bible, and Micah has made this very clear

when he said, "What doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk in reverent companionship with thy God?" This world is only one of God's homes, and when the body is worn out here there comes a change and we drop this worn-out body and pass into the Other Home, which our Heavenly Father has been preparing for us, perhaps with the help of our friends who have gone before. It is told of a little boy who soon passed to the Heavenly Home that he said, "I would like to go to the evening star and have plenty of flowers planted when Mother comes."

Each one takes with him to Heaven the noble traits of his character. These are immortal. Let us cultivate these, do what God wants us to do and thus in His companionship we will begin Heaven here. If keeping God's commandments becomes a habit, less and less do we wish to disobey them, more and more grows the desire to do God's will as it is done in Heaven. Do not let us worry because we accomplish so little, let us remember that this is God's world. He is carrying on His plans here. Let us do all we can to help, and nothing to hinder, leaving the rest to Him; remem-

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bering that He said, "Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." We are following a Leader who will surely bring us to victory.